

Interpreting the Civil War

Moving Beyond Battlefields

Our Civil War battlefields have become battlegrounds again — this time intellectual battlegrounds. A series of visits by historians from the Organization of American Historians in the late 1990s led to pointed criticism of National Park Service sites for being too narrowly focused on things purely military. Those historians suggested that more emphasis be put on causes and consequences, on civilians and slaves, on meaning and significance. Other historical groups, led by Civil War Round Tables and other heritage organizations, have railed at the idea of expanded or altered interpretation at Civil War battlefields; they assert that battlefields were set aside to tell the military history of the Civil War and nothing more.

At the landmark “Holding the High Ground” gathering in Nashville in August 1998, superintendents of Civil War-related parks — in large part the keepers of the national memory of the Civil War — initiated a hard look at the scope and nature of National Park Service interpretation of the Civil War. That look is finding form in a document now under development: “Interpreting the Civil War Through the Sites of the National Park System: An Initiative for the Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War.” The plan acknowledges profound shortcomings in the National Park Service approach to interpreting the Civil War, but it also reaffirms the Service’s longstanding commitment to resource-based interpretation. The plan is still a work in progress — and has been approved by absolutely nobody — but what follows is a summary of the key thoughts that the plan will likely embody.

Battlefields and Memory

In the aftermath of national trauma, we as a nation have (consciously or unconsciously) assigned the rights of memory to a certain group or groups. In the wake of the September 11 disaster, the nation at large has stepped aside in deference to the families of victims, firefighters, and rescue workers. In the aftermath of the Civil War, we accorded the rights to the memory of the conflict

to the veterans on both sides. They in turn fostered an astonishingly complete and swift reconciliation — one, it turns out, that was based in part on selective memory and forged at the expense of liberty for free blacks, newly freed slaves, and women.

Most of the legislation for America’s battlefield parks is a legacy of the reconciliatory efforts of veterans. Though the veterans are now gone, their descendants — and indeed the National Park Service — have faithfully carried on the veterans’ traditions. We as a nation still use our battlefields to define the nation’s Civil War experience in largely military terms.

As a result, huge tracts of intellectual turf remain unplowed for the American public; large segments of the population fail to see the war’s relevance (African American visitors are still shockingly uncommon at sites related to the Civil War). The public is far more knowledgeable about the experience of soldiers and the detail of battles than the significance of those battles to the war or the development of this nation. The single-minded focus on military aspects of the Civil War understates the conflict’s significance and relevance. The wartime struggle over the existence of the Union has transformed into an omnipresent search for a more perfect Union. The profound constitutional changes wrought by war were but the point of departure for the on-going quest for legal and social equality for all Americans, the still-vigorous debate over the proper reach of the Federal Government, and the never-ending effort to reconcile differing cultural values held under a single national flag. The struggle to define America continues, and all paths to understanding that struggle invariably pass through the cauldron of America’s Civil War.

The challenge faced by the National Park Service today is huge: to convey the significance and relevance of the Civil War while at the same time sustaining the Service’s invaluable tradition of resource-based interpretation (a concept that is at the very foundation of the National Park Service mission). Meeting that challenge will involve not just improving interpretation at Civil War battle-

fields, but also expanding the accepted definition of what constitutes a Civil War site. In fact, the sites of the National Park System — from battlefields to antebellum homes to northern factories to the homes of the renowned — offer an unmatched venue for modern Americans to understand, contemplate, and debate what Robert Penn Warren called “the great single event of our history.” The value of national parks is both individual and cumulative — each individually embodying drama, pathos, or brilliance while collectively reflecting a struggle that permeated every aspect of American society.

The Push Toward the Sesquicentennial

The approaching 150th anniversary of the American Civil War offers the current generation perhaps its most important opportunity to know, discuss, and commemorate America’s greatest national crisis while at the same time exploring its enduring relevance to America of the 21st century. Yet, in 2002, the National Park Service is largely ill-equipped to lead such a national discussion.

In preparation for the Sesquicentennial (which, given a broader view of the Civil War that includes causation, should already be under way), superintendents of Civil War sites are proposing an ambitious initiative: a multi-faceted, multi-year program that will simultaneously transform and improve interpretation of the Civil War in our national parks while providing a national forum for reflection on America’s greatest national crisis. The project will encourage Americans to use national parks — battlefields and non-battlefield sites — as the major vehicle for gaining greater understanding of the Civil War and its relevance today. Simultaneously, the National Park Service will use the full range of its sites related to the Civil

War as forums for engaging visitors in discussions about major events, places, and themes associated with the war — some of which have not traditionally fallen within the realm of public history.

The superintendents’ proposal — which is still very much in development — will include at least four major elements.

Redefining a “Civil War Site.” Fundamental to expanding interpretation of the Civil War through the sites of the National Park System is identifying those sites that can contribute to telling a bigger story. While battlefields can certainly do a better job than they do of putting battles into a broader context and illustrating how, for example, the local community responded to secession or emancipation, battlefields are not well suited to sustain a broad-ranging exploration of cause, consequence, and significance. To engage Americans in those sorts of conversations, the National Park Service needs to show the public that Civil War sites include more than just battlefields. Springfield Armory National Historic Site in Springfield, MA; Booker T. Washington National Monument in Hardy, VA; Homestead National Monument of America in Beatrice, NE; Women’s Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, NY; Hampton National Historic Site in Towson, MD; Frederick Law Olmstead National Historic Site in Brookline, MA; Boston African American National Historic Site in Boston, MA; Lincoln Home National Historic Site in Springfield, IL; and the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis, MO, are just a few of the non-battlefield sites that can illuminate important aspects of the nation’s Civil War experience. The walls of time (1861-1865) and geography (battlefields) that have so limited our interpretation of the Civil War need to be taken down.

Establishing a Thematic Context. The National Park Service will, for the first time, articulate a comprehensive thematic context for interpreting the Civil War through the sites of the National Park System. These themes will be derived from the study and synthesis of more than 150 thematic statements submitted by national parks related to the American Civil War. They are intended to act as a point of departure for developing media and programs and engaging visitors in figurative or literal discussions about the nation’s most destructive and transforming epoch.

Once the national themes are in place, individual parks will “plug in” to those that best reflect that particular park’s story or resources. For exam-

Bloody Angle diorama at the Chancellorsville Visitor Center at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. Photo courtesy National Park Service.



ple, in addition to illustrating themes related to military events, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park in Virginia vividly reflects the evermore difficult experience of civilians from 1862-1864. As the battle that precipitated the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation,* Antietam National in Maryland is perfectly suited to illuminate not just emancipation, but the interrelationship of politics and war. Wilson's Creek National Battlefield in Missouri reflects the unique experience of border States and communities during the Civil War. Hampton National Historic Site in Maryland can tell us much about the slave experience. By using resources and stories at the park level to illuminate larger issues, the National Park Service will avoid the much dreaded "cookie cutter" interpretation. A look through the local lens will also demonstrate that major issues connected with the war (slavery, States rights, emancipation) were not viewed homogeneously — that the human experience related to those issues varied greatly. Each park will tell these stories in its own way; collectively the sites of the National Park System will tell the broad story of the Civil War, with all its impacts and implications.

Upgrading Media. As proud as the National Park Service is of personal services, the stark fact is that at many sites only a fraction of its visitors receive the benefit of a front line interpreter. The majority of visitors to Civil War sites, and especially battlefield areas, are completely reliant upon media to describe and derive the significance of the park. At Gettysburg, only 15 percent of visitors attend ranger-guided programs; at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania, the figure is 18 percent. Yet in many parks, investment in media to reach the majority of visitors has been but a fraction of the funds invested in personal services.

The media that does exist — museum exhibits, wayside exhibits, furnishings, and audio-visual programs — vary widely in quality and content. Many parks have media dating to the 1960s. The best exhibit in the Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center is one installed in 1936. Money for, and interest in, updating that media has been scarce indeed. Some parks have more modern offerings — exhibits done in the last 20 years. But few of these exhibits go beyond the traditional boundaries of battlefield interpretation done 3 decades ago.

Any attempt to improve interpretation at Civil War sites must recognize the need to improve the media that are the primary means of communicating with visitors — an expensive proposition. "An

Initiative for the Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War" will include a Comprehensive Interpretive Plan for Civil War sites within the National Park System. This plan will do two things. First, it will link individual parks with the key national themes each park is best suited to help convey. Second, it will indicate what improvements in media and personal services each site needs to accomplish its mission within that larger context. The result: an interpretive framework within which Congress, individual parks, or partners can fund the media improvements needed to bring parks' interpretation in line with 21st-century thought and scholarship.

Beyond the Parks: Education and Interpretation Through the National Media and Internet. The sesquicentennial initiative will also reach beyond individual sites. Civil War parks, and perhaps the National Park Service at large, will seek partnerships within the media, on the Internet, and with America's schools that will use the national parks to tell the story of America's Civil War to visitors and non-visitors. Programs may include a series of public conversations about the Civil War along the line of the "American Presidents" series presented by C-SPAN a couple years ago—a high-quality series of programs aimed at the popular market—and a comprehensive Web site that provides a vast array of alternatives for engaging the public in the story of the Civil War as it is embodied by the national parks. Finally, the sesquicentennial initiative may include a large body of curriculum-based media (including satellite, Internet, and live programs) that will be the foundation of public education relating to the Civil War throughout the nation.

This sesquicentennial initiative is intended to be a far different animal than the popular celebrations that accompanied the centennial and the Nation's Bicentennial. Rather than being focused on events and observances, the superintendents hope that the sesquicentennial's legacy will be an array of interpretive media systems and educational programs at a variety of sites that dramatically expand the opportunities for all Americans to gain understanding and derive relevance from the nation's experience during the Civil War.

Note

- * The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was issued by Lincoln in October 1862, testing the waters and warning that if the Confederacy didn't return to the Union he would put the Emancipation Proclamation into effect January 1, 1863.

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